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FM AMEMBASSY MINSK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5701  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1431  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000177

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/28/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH PROVES HE IS A DIVIDER, NOT UNITER

REF: A. MINSK 163

[¶](#)B. MINSK 162

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[¶](#)11. (C) Opposition coalition leader Milinkevich on February 27 told Ambassador that coalition was fragmented but denied he was at fault for the divisions and accused left-wing coalition parties of hijacking the agenda of the upcoming congress of democratic forces. The coalition leader also noted preparations for the March 25 demonstration, but had no details to share with Ambassador. Milinkevich stressed that he declined the invitation to participate in the Belarusian opposition delegation to Washington because he could not work with most of the participants. Ambassador reiterated to Milinkevich that coalition leaders should learn to work together despite their differences. End summary.

Milinkevich Disapproves of Washington Delegation

[¶](#)12. (C) De facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich in a February 27 meeting explained to Ambassador his reasons for not participating in the Belarusian opposition delegation trip to the U.S. (ref A). According to Milinkevich, the composition of the delegation -- Belarusian National Front (BNF) leader Vintsuk Vyachorka, United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko, Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Sergey Kalyakin, Irina Kozulina, spouse of jailed presidential candidate, and Igor Matskevich, head of the Belarusian Association of Democratic NGOs -- did not represent a united team, and thus Milinkevich could not "in good conscience" participate in the delegation. However, he hoped that the U.S. was not offended by his refusal. Ambassador told Milinkevich that the U.S. was disappointed with his decision, given his current status as de facto opposition coalition leader, but she reassured him that the U.S. would continue working with all pro-democracy activists in Belarus.

"No Unity in Coalition"

[¶](#)13. (C) Milinkevich claimed that not he, but outside forces were contributing to the divisions within the coalition, most notably Moscow. Citing Moscow's alleged financial backing of the BPC and its leader Kalyakin, Milinkevich feared the congress of democratic forces scheduled for March 17-18 (ref B) would be decidedly pro-Russian and vote in favor of a union with Russia. Ambassador doubted the congress would vote on or in favor of a union, noting that Belarus'

political parties were above all pro-independence.

¶4. (C) Milinkevich also alleged that the opposition had split into two blocks -- the left wing, pro-Russia block and the right wing, pro-European block -- which made it even more difficult to work together. According to Milinkevich, he was not the initiator of the "unavoidable" divisions within the coalition, claiming that the political parties had long agreed to work independently of each other. Civil society groups, however, were allegedly throwing their support behind Milinkevich, particularly the Belarusian Association of Democratic NGOs, religious groups, entrepreneurs, and students (septel). He even cited the February 26 conference of BNF members in Brest who voted to support the "For Freedom" movement rather than the party's national leadership.

Milinkevich And Crew Do Not Support a Congress

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¶5. (C) The coalition leader reiterated he and his supporters doubted the legitimacy or purpose of the congress and, therefore, would most likely not participate in it. Ambassador asked Milinkevich if Vyachorka's proposal for broader participation provided room for compromise. Milinkevich admitted it was a positive step but did not indicate whether he supported the proposal.

The Ambiguous March 25 Demonstration

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¶6. (C) When asked, Milinkevich explained that preparing for the March 25 demonstration (celebrating Belarus' short-lived independence from 1918 to 1920) was his current project; however, he could not provide any substantive details on

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plans. He promised to inform Ambassador as soon as the planning committee met in the coming weeks. (Comment: With the event less than four weeks away, one imagines that plans need to be worked out soon. End comment.)

¶7. (C) According to Milinkevich, regional activists would gather in Minsk to participate in the demonstration, which he assured would be peaceful and inform people that they were part of Europe. If Lukashenko really wanted to make democratic reforms, then he too should join the demonstration. The coalition leader noted that his written (and public) invitation to Lukashenko had angered many within the coalition, but he decided it was a good idea, noting the support it received from the intelligentsia (who make up a very small fraction of opposition activists). Ambassador closed the meeting by stressing that the coalition needed to remain united and develop a common strategy.

Comment

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¶8. (C) Milinkevich repeatedly maintained that he was not at fault for the divisions within the coalition, but he constantly referred to activities that demonstrated some degree of cooperation among the party leaders -- i.e., the trip to the U.S. and planning for the democratic congress -- in stark contrast to his individualistic, uncoordinated approach. Indeed, Milinkevich has virtually abdicated his responsibility as chairperson of the coalition's Political Council to pursue his "For Freedom" civic campaign, and seems happy to have hijacked the party operatives of BNF leader Vyachorka, his closest coalition ally. He is hopeful that this still-to-be-defined movement will allow him to demonstrate his capacity as a leader. His belief that the democratic opposition would vote for any kind of union with Russia is ill-informed and frankly disturbing. We will report septel the prospects for Milinkevich's movement, but suffice it to say that even Milinkevich's most ardent supporters have been disappointed with him.

s performance thus far.  
Stewart